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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

< When A Chicken Farm Moves Next Door, Odor May Not Be The Only Problem

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MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Now to North Carolina, which has one of the country's largest poultry producers and getting bigger. Large-scale chicken farms are spreading across the state, which sometimes brings them closer to residential areas. And as Keri Brown of member station WFDD reports, some of these neighbors consider the farms much more than a nuisance but rather a potential health hazard.

KERI BROWN, BYLINE: Craig Watts walks among rows of chickens, checking feed lines at his industrial-size chicken houses in Fairmont, N.C.

(SOUNDBITE OF CHICKENS CLUCKING)

BROWN: He contracts with Perdue and has raised birds for more than 20 years. He says sometimes it's a struggle to meet the demands of the industry.

CRAIG WATTS: They don't have to spend 24-7 with that chicken. They don't have to deal with this waste. I deal with it and that kind of stuff. So, you know, it's a good situation for them.

BROWN: His birds produce 700 tons of poultry waste each year, and he's responsible

for it. It's spread in nearby fields and sold to farmers for fertilizer. Watts' operation is one of thousands of confined animal feeding operations in the state. These large-scale chicken farms are popping up near residential areas in western North Carolina, especially in Surry County. And that's worrying to residents Terry and Mary Marshall.

TERRY MARSHALL: The waste starts to burn, and your throat starts to hurt, you know you're in it. It smells like a lot of ammonia. It smells like oftentimes, just dead, rotting meat.

BROWN: The waste is a combination of manure, feed and carcasses, which can cause harmful gas emissions. Mary says there are dust particles in the air, and it can be hard to breathe.

MARY MARSHALL: We had some friends over to the house, several people one night. And it was so bad that they had flashlights out in the front yard and you could see it.

BROWN: Environmental groups are concerned, too. Will Scott with the Yadkin Riverkeeper says chicken farms aren't under the same scrutiny as other industries. These dry-litter poultry operations are exempt from state odor ordinance, and federal regulators don't monitor their air emissions.

WILL SCOTT: I think what you're seeing here is the influence of a very powerful industry over state legislatures and over the federal government, to the point where even the Environmental Protection Agency has not stepped up to regulate these facilities, despite that we know they're polluting waters across the country.

BROWN: The Environmental Protection Agency doesn't see it that way. Allison Wiedeman is with the EPA Water Permits Division. She says water quality regulations have been in place for years, and states can enforce additional requirements on poultry producers.

ALLISON WIEDEMAN: We see that it's working. We know that these facilities have permits that they discharge. And so all I can tell you right now is that the process is working.

BROWN: Just how much waste is produced is unknown. The North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality says it doesn't have a system to track these dry-litter systems. Bob Ford with the North Carolina Poultry Federation says more regulation would hurt the industry, which is worth \$34 billion to the state economy. He adds odor and other issues are the farmers' responsibility, but he acknowledges companies could be more involved.

BOB FORD: There's always room for improvement on anything we do out here, I guess, and try to use buffer zones a little more, maybe some tree planting, things like that that would have - reduce the impact.

BROWN: Tyson and Perdue are two major companies that contract with independent farmers. Both companies declined an interview. They did release statements that said their farmers are required to follow the law, laws that don't offer any protections for Terry and Mary Marshall. Mary says it's already too late for her neighborhood.

M. MARSHALL: I have to hold myself together all the time. I knew it was going to be bad, but I had no idea it was going to be this bad.

BROWN: Marshall is lobbying state lawmakers. She wants future chicken farms away from residential areas and something to control the odor and pollution, which she says will get worse in the hot North Carolina summers. For NPR News, I'm Keri Brown Surry County, N.C.

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